RABBI EZRA

THE VICTIM

MODERN AUTHORS' SERIES

RABBI EZRA

THE VICTIM

Two Stories

BY

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RABBI EZRA

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"Moses, Moses, I am not pleased with you. Why do you want to be engaged at twenty, when before you wanted to marry at twenty-five?"

Old Ezra gazed at his son's brows as if seeking to decipher a flaming cabbalistic signature in the innermost part of his head.

"I love Rebecca."

"You love Rebecca? I can believe that you love a little foot, a white skin, a beardless face, but how do you know that these constitute Rebecca? You have studied the Roman code and the Christian code, but you have not studied women. Have I cared for you these twenty years in order that you should begin your own life with an act of foolishness? How many women have you known, Moses, that you can come to your old father and say that you are in love?"

"I know only one, and I love her with my whole heart."

"With your whole heart—what does that mean? Have you learned to know your whole heart?"

"I beg you, dear father, not to joke at my feelings."

"Moses, Moses, don't be hot-headed. I tell you don't be hot-headed. Let me tell you a story. Come, sit beside me on this divan. I will tell you of my father, what he told me when I was twenty. 'Ezra,' he said to me, 'when you marry, marry a rich woman. Take it from your father that woman is perishable. But a silver dollar, Ezra, remains unchanged for generations.' I thought to myself, he is an old man, and I swore to him that my bride should have a dower of thirty thousand dollars. But I want to make clear to you, Moses, why I loved her, why I married her, little Leah, why I lived with her in sorrow until she disappeared like snow in one's hand. Because I did not know women, because I did not know Ezra, myself.

"Moses, I am an old man and desire nothing from the world save that it may go well with you. But when I was twenty my mind

was like a chicken coop in the morning at sunrise. When I went along the street and met a Christian maiden, or one of our own race, I could feel her presence to my finger-tips, and used to wish that I were King Solomon with five thousand wives.

"But she had to be fashioned as if the Lord had created her for himself, understand, Moses, with all the graces becoming in a woman. When she was little, and pale, and thin, and quick as a rat, I lowered my umbrella toward her side, because it made my eyes ache to look at her. But when she flourished as the cedars of Lebanon, then I dropped my umbrella on the other side, and carried her image home with me and saw it above the Talmud and heard the echo of her footfalls in the sacred words. And during the night it came to me and sought me out in my dreams—her image. God the Righteous, I had it before me as Moses, whom you have to thank for your name, on Nebo had that of the Promised Land, had it as if I could grasp it with my hands, saw the milk and honey flowing and could not cross the Jordan because of the will of the Lord.

"But I said to myself—Moses, can you

imagine what I said to myself?—Well, I said to myself, 'You are a child of the devil, you have been so since the womb. When you have followed your desires, when you have crossed the Jordan, wrath will overtake you and you will be a child of death. You must not go to women who please the senses, but to women who please the heart, if your flesh shall not become as that of Job, if the labor of your days and nights shall not become accursed and if you are not to eat grass like Nebuchadnezzar.'

"Then I went to old Ezekiel and asked him to give me his daughter Leah, and swore to him that I would lay my hands beneath her feet. She was a maiden, was Leah, like the shadow on a windowpane—one might have used her as a lamp shade; but I loved her because I imagined she would save me from myself; from death and the devil, whom I had felt over my head day and night. At first she didn't want me; because I was stout and broad and she was so little and thin that she was ashamed to cross the street with me. But as none other presented himself she took me.

"Now, Moses, hear from your old father how limited is our human understanding

and how vain all our foresight. I had not yet tested the sweets of love, just like you; I was still as pure as the dew on Hebron, just like you, although you have studied the Roman code and the Christian code, and read Moses and the prophets. But, when I tasted the sweets of love with Leah, I perceived that it was a sin before the Lord, and thanked the Lord that he had given me a wife who did not allow me to wander in the paths of the ungodly. During my lonely nights I had dreamed that love would delight the body like a refreshing draught, and, behold, it tasted no more palatable to Leah and me than medicine tastes to the sick. And we took it as one takes medicine, with closed eyes and choking in the throat, and no more than the doctor had prescribed, and when it was over one felt judged by God and condemned, and moved away like thieves in the night who had met each other through devilish means. Then I said to myself: 'You were right, Ezra, in thinking that love of the flesh is the service of the devil and not worthy a man's following.' But, Moses, believe your old father, I was not happy.

"I was not happy, Moses, the Lord is my witness, because I could no more talk un-

derstandingly with Leah than I can talk with my clothesrack, or than I can talk with my finger nails. Her thoughts were not my thoughts, because my thoughts are my thoughts and because she had none. Then I retired into loneliness, and the loneliness was as speechless as Leah, and said to myself, 'Ezra, you have bought a cat in a bag, upon your head be the blame. You could have proved whether her spirit was created for your spirit, whether her heart is brother to your heart. Do not let her notice, Ezra, that you have bought a cat in a bag, because she is innocent as a lamb led to water. Why did you not use as much foresight in selecting a wife as you do when you go into a shop and buy a cravat for one mark twenty?'

"So I lived with her and suffered and kept silence for two years, and loved her always, my Leah, because she had saved me from the lust of the flesh, until she should have given me a son and had not room enough, and it pleased the Lord to take her from me, together with my child.

"Moses, that was as if they had seared the bowels out of my body with glowing iron, as if the earth were burned out and

dead, as if I alone remained to bear the curse. Then I set myself against Jehovah, then I cried: 'Accursed be thy name! Why hast thou taken from me the woman I chose in order to serve thee! Art thou stricken with madness that thou crushest thy child and sparest thy enemies! Canst thou not take the lamb from the rich, must thou take from the poor what has become his all! Accursed be thy name! Must thou deliver me unto the seducer, must thou drive me forth into temptation and sin, must thou let me fall into the hands of the ungodly once more, after I have redeemed my soul from thy ire at cost of care and sorrow! Accursed be thy name! My damnation be upon thy head! And then I went, to slay my sorrow, unto the daughters of the waste. Yes, Moses, you must know it, I went unto the daughters of the waste. Not that I say to you, Moses, my son, that you shall go unto the daughters of the waste. Do what you will. But I, your father Ezra, I went unto the daughters of the waste. And when I went I cursed Jehovah: 'Thou, Lord, art to blame for my going to the daughters of the waste in order to slay my sorrow. Why didst thou take my Leah from me?'

"And now, Moses, open your ears that you may understand me rightly. I have tested the Christian damsels, I have tested the Jewish damsels, I have tested the daughters of Ham. I have followed the desire of my heart, I have followed the desire of my senses, because I strove to drown my sorrow, because I strove to forget my Leah. I have sought those who flourished as the cedars of Lebanon, those who were full of all the charms that can deck a woman. And I found that the more she pleased my senses, the better could I converse with her understandingly, the better could she converse with me; the more friendly she became, the more she delighted my heart. And I found, Moses, my son, that the more she delighted my senses the less I felt the conviction of sin, the nearer I felt to the Almighty. Moses, if you were to offer me half a million I would not take it for this knowledge. No, I would not take it, because this knowledge bears interest to twenty per cent., to thirty per cent., to a hundred per cent., and the interest is children and children's children. One may be unhappy with half a million, but one cannot be unhappy in the knowledge that love of the flesh is not the service of the

devil, because man wanders in the path the Lord intended when he created two beings for each other, inside and outside, body and soul!

"I have been crushed to earth, I have been broken in spirit, I have beaten my breast, I have cried: 'Lord, Lord, I have heard thy secret counsel. Thou snarest the wise in their own cunning, so that they pass their days in darkness and grope about at mid-day as at night. And then I went, Moses, and sought a wife with all my senses. I found Sarah, the daughter of Mordecai, beautiful to look upon as the newly created earth, and she became your mother. I tried her heart and reins, and I found her heart was brother to my heart. And during the wedding night, Moses, my son, during the night you have to thank for your existence, the knowledge came to me that her body was twin to my body, and I praised the Lord, whose spirit does not lie, whose truth stands open in his works."

Rabbi Ezra wiped the sweat from his brow and breathed heavily. Moses slunk thence with lowered head.

THE VICTIM

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"No, please don't ask me how I came here. How can that interest you? To-morrow you will laugh at me, I can see that. Why do you want to make me cry? Isn't it much pleasanter for you when I am lively?"

And the slim, snow-white, graceful Munich girl with the thick, unbound, luxurious hair, leaned over him trembling, kissing him on his mouth and on his half-closed eyelids to make him forget his question. But it did not help her. He drew back his face with a grimace which sent a cold shudder all through her. He repulsed her caresses, pushed her away from him. Thus he made her entirely helpless, as her personal beauty was all she could call her own in this world. He was not a man of unbridled passions, but a gourmet for whom Nature and God had not created anything good enough. He had to add his own salt and pepper to everything.

Early in life he had learned the joy of living, and now he scorned everything that other mortals held in esteem. It did not please him that this beautiful girl, robbed of her dignity, should sin light-heartedly in order to satisfy his passion. First, he wanted to remind her especially of what she did, so that in the end he might enjoy the quiet pangs of her poor lost soul. He did not attempt to force this by words, nor by smiling looks, but became as earnest as a confessor, and asked her plainly if hunger had driven her to it.

"No, no; I have always had enough to eat as long as I can remember. We used to have meat three times a week at home."

He might have known that. Anyone who looked at her could hardly imagine that she had ever suffered from hunger.

"But you had heavy, bad dreams that bothered you? You came here to enjoy your youth?"

"O God, no! Don't ask me any further. Do you live here in Zurich, or are you only here on a visit?"

"On a visit. Your parents are living?"

"Yes, but they don't know where I am."

"Not even that you are in Zurich?"

"No; they don't know anything about me."

"What is your name?"

"My name is Martha."

"Martha? So, so. Yes. There are many Marthas in the world. I knew already that your name was Martha."

"You need only put 'Martha' if you want to write to me. You may be sure that I will get the letter. All my friends write simply 'Martha.'"

"And your family name?"

"I wouldn't tell you that if you put a knife to my throat! I would sooner let you kill me than that I should speak my father's name here!"

"How did you come here, then?"

"I'll tell you that another time. Only not to-day, please."

"Perhaps you had too much work at home? You had to get up early and scrub the steps."

"I have always liked work."

"Really, is it such a pleasure to you? Here, however, you have it easier."

"Oh, why do you say that? I'll tell you what brought me here. I believe you are sorry for me. Other men only want to listen to nasty stories, and they tell me to

keep my mouth shut whenever I say anything but flattery. God knows, I have not spoken of it to a soul before, and yet I think of nothing else, day and night. What consoles me is that it all must come to an end here. Then it will be over and forgotten."

"Don't you believe in a hereafter?"

"There may be one for the rich people and for the good, but not for us; that would be too frightful!" And the young girl looked deep into his eyes as if she was not quite sure whether he was not making fun of her frankness. Then she put out the light and told:

"I was fourteen years old when mother sent me out to work. I wasn't developed, had no figure, and my eyes were as big as a calf's. There were four of us apprentices: Resi, Cilly, Kathi and I. As soon as Monday morning came we began to count how many days it would be until Sunday. Sunday afternoons we visited each other, drank coffee at home, and then walked in the English Garden. Do you know the English Garden at Munich?"

"Yes, yes, I've often gone skating there with my little boy."

"You needn't have told me that now!"

"But what did you four talk about when you went walking?"

"Mostly about the forewoman. She was so clever that all of us looked upon her as a superior being. When a lady came to our place for the first time the forewoman would look at her, then kneel down at once and cut out the stuff. It was as if she sketched with her scissors."

"And you didn't talk of anything else?"

"Why? Oh, yes. Each one told what had happened at home. Cilly had a brother for whom she still made clothes. He was still going to school. Many times she helped him with his tasks. You can't imagine how proud she was of him. Now, when I am alone, I often wish that I had a child, and then I always remember little Hans. He was so pretty!"

"Now, don't cry!"

"I'm not crying about that. I'm only thinking how at first I was afraid of it, and now I should be so happy to have something from it."

"But you would only degrade a child."

"Yes, you are right. I would spoil one. I would love it so frightfully. It should have everything easier than other children."

"Then you still love him?"

"Oh, yes. You *are* good. I can tell you everything."

"How did you come to know him?"

"It was midwinter, one evening at nine o'clock. I had been at work two years. I wore long dresses, and when I went along the street, with my apron on and my hat off, the men used to lick their lips at me. I laughed at that, because I took it for flattery, but I didn't think any more about it. Then, one evening the manager gave me a gown to take to the Baroness Umbra in the Schwabinger Landstrasse. I wanted to take a tram, but they were all full. It was storming so that tiles were blown from the roofs and it was icy cold. Everybody was wrapped in mantles and hoods, but I had only my jacket with the big buttons and my hat with the feather on it that I had to hold in order to keep it from blowing off my head. In the Theatriverstrasse I began to wish I had not been born. I had no feeling in my hands and feet and at every step I slipped. Then I broke my umbrella against a lamp-post and the wind blew it into strips. The snow came inside my coat and ran down my neck. I was wet through and through, like

a dog out in the rain. In front of the Feldherrnhalle the string by which I carried the box broke and the gown fell into the snow. Then I would have rather died. I picked up the gown and brushed the snow off the paper with my pockethandkerchief, so that it would not sink in. Then I tried to carry the box under my arm. Then came a gust of wind that blew my skirts up over my knees. God, O God, O God, I thought, I hope nobody saw that!

"Directly after that a gentleman came up to me and asked me if he could not carry my bundle, and I said yes.

"So we went together to the Schwabinger Landstrasse, and then he accompanied me back to our home in Sendlinger Strasse. He told me that he worked in an office and had to support his sixty-year-old mother out of his salary. I, too, told him where I worked. I had hardly seen him and would not have recognized him again in my life. But the next evening, as I came out of the shop, there he was again alongside of me, as soon as I had parted from the others. As he had been so friendly I could not send him away. And that's the way it happened. Every evening he would walk with me to my door and tell

me how good he was to his old mother. Then, when it was springtime, he told me one evening that he loved me. At first I didn't believe it. But for a whole month he didn't speak of anything else, and then, one time when he asked me again if I loved him, I said yes. It was astonishing; from that day on he was not the same. Before he had been always so good and gentle; then it was all ended. He asserted that it was not true that I loved him. I said yes, on my salvation. But that made no difference. All day long during my work I kept thinking only of him, wondering what sort of a face he would make when we met again. But it was never the same face. He rolled his eyes as if he had swallowed a fly, and sometimes he wouldn't speak a word the whole way home. Before he often kissed me goodby. He didn't do that any more. I asked him to, but he wouldn't. He called me a coquette. I was so shocked, I didn't know what that was. At first I couldn't remember the word. Then I wrote it down and asked Cilly, and she told me it meant a girl who went about the street at night. Mother asked me why I looked so bad, why I didn't eat and why the corners of my mouth turned down, but I couldn't

say anything. I had promised never to speak of him at home until we could announce our engagement, and his salary wasn't enough for that yet. We had to wait until his mother died. But once, when he turned his back to me in scorn in the Rathausplatz and walked in front of me with his hands in his trousers pockets, I ran after him and hung about his neck; indeed I loved him, I said, he must see that. I wanted him to be the same as before. I hadn't done anything to hurt him and he shouldn't hurt me so. Then he murmured, 'Show me that you love me.' I asked him how I could show him that, and he answered that I knew well enough, that I was a child no longer. But I was just a coquette, I was making sport of him, I should not make a fool of him any longer.

"I couldn't sleep all night and kept thinking what he could have meant, and how I could have been unkind to him. At last, I decided to ask Cilly, as he wouldn't tell me himself. But I didn't want to tell Cilly the whole story. Nobody in the whole world knew of my intercourse with him, and I wanted it to be a secret until we could be engaged openly. He told me that his

mother's health often failed her; then she grew better again.

"After lunch I asked Cilly, as we walked arm in arm, if she had ever been in love. She thought for a moment, then she said yes. I asked her what she had done. She said, 'I took a warm foot bath.' Did that do any good? She said yes. And if she hadn't done anything else? No, that was all. I was anxious to know some other things about her love affair, but she laughed and said those were private matters.

"That evening, when he joined me, I told him that I knew now, Cilly had told me, only he had to wait until to-morrow. 'To-morrow, then,' he said, and kissed me at the door. He was more loving than he had been for weeks. The whole evening I trembled for fear mother might think it queer of me to want to take a foot bath. I was so worried! When they went to sleep, I slipped down to the kitchen in my chemise. I had left the fire burning under the boiler. I quietly filled the tub full and got right into it. I had a feeling I never had before. You won't believe it, but I trembled and shivered with joy, and thought what I should say to him when he saw me so changed. I slipped into

bed and slept sweeter than I had ever slept in my life. The next day the misery was even greater. First we sank into each others arms and kissed each other so that I came near crying for joy; then he said I should go with him, but I said he knew that I had to go home. Then he called me a silly, stupid beast. That drove me to going to a fortune-teller on Sunday. I wanted to tell her as little about our love as I had told Cilly, but in five minutes she had it all out of me. Then she told me that I must go with him and not deny him anything; then he would know that I really loved him. I asked her what I owed her, and she asked me how much I had with me. I said twelve marks, fifty pfennigs. Good, she said, usually it amounted to twenty, but she would be glad to take what I had, because it was I. And then she said, 'good-by, until later on.'

"The next night I lay down on my bed with my clothes on. I only took off my shoes. When eleven o'clock struck I tiptoed down the stairs. He hugged and kissed me in the hallway and then took me to his dwelling. An hour later he brought me back; but God knows, I couldn't understand why he was so happy. I thought to myself, there

really must be something remarkable about love for a man to feel so happy when he learns a girl really loves him.

"And then I became his mistress. During the first week he said, 'If you really love me you can live no longer with your parents. If the butcher boys saw me in the hallway they would kill me.' I took my things out that night, and the next day I told them in the shop that I had a headache, and went out to look for a room with a bed and two chairs. That evening I did not go home. Sunday, my father came. He asked me if I was still working at the shop. I said yes. Then he asked who my lover was. I said, 'I won't tell you; you can beat me as much as you want, I won't tell you!' Then he said he would fetch the police. I answered that I wasn't afraid of the police, I wasn't afraid of the whole world. Then he fell on the bed and cried and shook; I thought his soul would come out of his body. Then he stood up, looked me straight in the face, gave me a frightful box on the ear and went. I have never seen him since.

"My lover spent every evening with me. His mother was so ill that he gave up his lodgings. He needed the money for medi-

cine and for the doctor. Often, when he hadn't any, I gave him mine, but I hadn't much left, as I had always to provide supper for two. In the beginning he wanted to introduce me to his mother, but that was impossible now, she was too weak. The surprise would kill her on the spot.

"Once, at the shop, when the overseer was out, Resi and Cilly talked about a girl that had a baby. I asked if she wasn't married. They said no. Then I had an awful fright. I grew ill and had to go home. I cried until evening. Never in my life had I thought that one could have a child unless one was married. When I told him that he called me a stupid little goose; he wasn't afraid of anything like that. But from that day I had no more quiet hours.

"Then his employer sent him here to Zurich. While we were sitting in the railroad car a girl came in. At first she sat down in the opposite corner, but when she saw my lover she gave him a look, and then sat herself down very near to him. She told how she had been engaged as a waitress. She was so tightly laced that it took my breath away. Then she couldn't keep her feet still, and she fanned herself with a pockethandkerchief

that smelled like a menagerie. She kept rolling her eyes about. She exchanged glances with my lover, which must have meant the finest things, but I couldn't understand them. Often she looked at me, and then I was ashamed to death. I had on a dress from which the color was gone almost entirely, wore a grey shawl over my head, and I put my shoes under the seat because they were split in front. She wore brand new low tan shoes with gold buttons. Her dress was made so tight that one could see her knees. On her lap was a reticule with bon bons and a bottle of cherry brandy in it. She asked me to have some, but my lover said I must not make myself sick. Near Lindon, when the locomotive stopped on account of a hot axle, she nearly sank into his arms.

"I was seasick on the steamboat, and I hardly know how we reached Zurich.

"We hadn't been here two days when he took her out to a concert hall and didn't come home all night. The next morning I went out to look for him, and when I came back his things were gone. I looked all over the city for him. I thought he must be just around every corner. At last I found him sitting on a bench on the quay. I said he

should come with me. He said we dared not do so, we dared not live together in Zurich, the police would not allow it. We should be arrested if we lived here together without being married. But he would come visit me as often as he could.

"During a fortnight he came just three times. I had found work on white goods and sat at home all day sewing. The third time he came I asked him where he was living, but he wouldn't answer me. Often I went out to seek him, promising myself that I wouldn't come back without him.

"One night, near eleven o'clock, I found him coming out of a swell restaurant. I said to his face, 'You are living with that waitress.' He said, 'That's none of your business.' Then I asked him, 'Don't you love me any more?' And he answered, 'How can I love you any more if I don't come to see you?' At first I didn't understand him. 'What did you say?' I asked him. And he repeated, 'How can I love you when we are not together any more?' It went green and blue before my eyes. I put my hands over my face and ran away. I had to think it over. What did he understand by love if he

couldn't love me any more just because we didn't live together. I would have loved him just the same, I knew that. I loved him, and still love him. I could have worked all my life for him; and he couldn't love me any more because he didn't come to see me. I wasn't a simple child any longer. Also at times I had thought that there was something sweet in being together. But the thought came to me that from the beginning he had wanted nothing else. Then I ran down to the sea and wanted to drown myself, but that wasn't enough for me. I had such sorrow in my heart that the water appeared too friendly and pleasant. I rushed through the streets, and thought if only somebody would come and abuse me so that I could lose my thoughts. I felt that if somebody would trample on me it would hurt me less. I must let myself be degraded as deep as possible, then, perhaps, I would not notice the claws that were tearing at my heart.

"I thought for a long time. A gentleman came and stroked my hair. I might have gone with him, perhaps. But he was too friendly, he was too respectful. He wore kid gloves and seemed to me like somebody

who wanted to save me. No, no, I must go down, down, where one could no longer see nor hear. I said to myself, 'I must be so miserable that I can't feel my sorrow any more.'

"My lover had told me that there were women in Zurich who took young girls to sell them and to suck their last drop of blood. I asked a policeman who saw me sitting on a street corner where to find such a woman. He asked me if I had been there before, and I said yes. Then he took me by the arm and led me to the station house. There sat a gentleman with a red face, a black mustache and blue spectacles, who asked me again if I had been with such a woman. And I said yes again. Then he asked me where that was, and I pointed anywhere with my finger; I was a stranger here, and had gone out that day for the first time and couldn't find my way back. Then he sent two policemen with me and they brought me here. That's the way I came here——"

"But isn't it pretty comfortable here?"

"At first madame was displeased with me, because I was always so melancholy. But since she has found that the most repulsive

of our gentlemen take to me, and that I never say no to anybody, she likes me as well as she does bright, lively Mademoiselle Palmyra, who is here with me."

It was Sunday when the young man found himself in the open air the next day. The bells were sounding, men, women and children were coming from church. The young man would have liked to make a joke out of it, but he was not in the mood. He had never seemed so small to himself; but, then, he had never appeared so good to himself. He contrasted the careless, happy voices of the churchgoers, who had just heard a sermon and were on their way to a good dinner, with the seriousness of his own soul and he understood, without a spark of frivolity, that he did not envy them. He had assumed the mask of a preacher the evening before. Now it seemed to him as if he himself had listened to a sermon. He had learned to believe in innocence where he had least expected to find it. When he thought of the girl he was forced to despise himself. She, who had wished evil to none, was condemned to shame; he, who had never wished good to anyone, still held a position in society.

He felt the contrast, and the impression remained with him for life.